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SUBJECT: MEETING WITH THE MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE AND
FORESTRY

¶1. (U) Summary: On February 20, CG Juba met with Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) Minister of Agriculture and Forestry Dr. Martin Elia Lomuro. The Minister provided an overview of his ministry's capacity as well as his ambitious vision for the future. He described the irresponsible logging operations that he has suspended and how agriculture could become a major pillar of the economy of Southern Sudan. Lomuro said that discussion of the White Nile Ltd. Petroleum deal had been postponed again, but the tide of opinion within the Council of Ministers seemed to be running against the deal. End summary.

Agricultural Outlook

¶2. (U) Lomuro said that he had begun work at his ministry by completing an inventory of human and physical resources, neither of which met the mark. He stressed that agriculture should be a driving force in the economy of the South. There was the potential not only for food security, but also for surplus production that could be exported to neighboring countries, and to the North.

¶3. (U) He described the first phase of agricultural recovery as modest. Last planting season seeds and tools became available only in June and July, too late to do much good. This year FAO had already begun distribution before the first rains, but only eighteen percent of the South was covered. The EU had granted USD 700,000 to Veterinarians Sans Frontieres for additional distributions in Upper Nile, and Lomuro had sought supplemental funding for his ministry that would permit eighty percent coverage. He said that cassava was the staple crop for Equatoria, with millet and maize favored in other zones. Lomuro said that much former agricultural land had become overgrown during the war, and required clearance, and that in widespread areas land mines remained an impediment.

¶4. (U) Lomuro said that Phase II of the recovery program was longer term and far more ambitious, and that it would require new institutions. He hoped to group farmers and to provide them tractors for more efficient production, with the support of micro-finance from an agricultural bank that does not yet exist. The recovery of former cash crops such as tea, sugar, coffee, and tobacco was a long-range goal, as was creation of a strategic grain reserve to see the South through periods of drought. He also hoped to find financing for an industrial mill and a mill to produce peanut oil and peanut butter. Lomuro concluded that agricultural extension services and a clear land tenure policy would need to be in place before the South could undertake serious agricultural reform.

Forestry Prospects

15. (SBU) Lomuro said that Southern Sudan still holds rich forestry resources in teak (Equatoria), mahogany (Bahr el Ghazal), and gum Arabic (Upper Nile), but that the war had brought huge devastation to the tropical forests. Both sides -- but largely the SPLM -- had granted concessions at bargain prices to at least eight foreign logging firms from Asia, Europe (UK), and South Africa that had engaged in extensive clear cutting. A number of local firms had cashed in on this bonanza as well. He said that the concessions had been a source of easy money, but that it was not always clear where the resulting revenues had gone. On November 4, 2005, he had issued an order suspending all further logging operations until a new forestry code had been adopted, and transparent tenders publicized. He had also brought local chiefs into the debate because of their traditional claims to revenues from the use of local resources.

16. (U) The Ministry had acquired satellite imagery and chartered some over flights to assess what damage had been done, and what resources remained. Lomuro asked if the USG might have any satellite or other forestry data that it could provide to help with this task. Teams for the Forestry Service had begun to visit sites to do an inventory, but vehicles and funds were major constraints.

17. (U) Lomuro noted that non-commercial or small entrepreneur use of forest resources was also an issue. Widespread production of charcoal had denuded some areas, and bamboo was being harvested for construction at an unsustainable rate. One of his top priorities was to license these activities to generate some revenues and to

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halt the most destructive processes. He said that he favored introducing gas as a cooking source to slow the felling of trees for firewood. CG observed that this would be costly and require technology that does not exist in much of the South. The use of simple, fuel efficient cooking stoves such as those manufactured in the IDP camps in Darfur made better sense. Lomuro requested a point of contact.

Petroleum Controversy

18. (SBU) Lomuro revealed that the decision on the White Nile Ltd. vs. Total petroleum controversy had been postponed yet again, the fifth time. He observed that there were many questions about the White Nile deal and some "dodgy" business connections. He said that many ministers were unhappy about the manner in which the original deal was brokered, and that the tide of opinion seemed to be running against White Nile. Lomuro is one of several Sudanese officials invited to the Southern Sudan Investment Conference in Nairobi on March 14 and 15. Other invited participants are Salva Kiir, Riek Machar, GNU Minister of Energy El Jaz, GNU Minister of Investment Malik Agar, GoSS Finance Minister Chol, GoSS Commerce and Trade Minister Makana, and GoSS Minister of Mines and Energy Akol. Lomuro is rumored to be a partisan of the Total consortium.

Comment

19. (SBU) Lomuro is very confident and visionary in his view of what can be achieved, but some of his ideas seem premature, and are unworkable for now.

Bio Data

¶10. (SBU) Lomuro is a Bari in his late 40s who came into the GoSS on the shirttails of Bona Malwal and the South Sudan Democratic Forum. A veterinary doctor by training, with a microbiology specialty, he spent seventeen years working in Europe, principally London, during the war. He was a major proponent of the South-South dialogue and has been a critic of SPLM and John Garang.

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